

# Navigating the 'big little leap' to kindergarten

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No matter how well children are prepared for kindergarten, their transition to the classroom during the first few months plays a key role in their success, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that kids who made a more successful transition in

the first 10–14 weeks of [kindergarten](#) scored higher than others on tests of academic and social-behavioral skills at the end of the school year.

Important parts of the transition—what the researchers called a "big little leap"—included making new friends, learning to work with others and adapting to new academic demands.

And a crucial finding was that this transition was important for all kids.

"Transition difficulties hurt children's development, regardless of the initial readiness skills that they entered with," said Jing Sun, lead author of the study and research specialist at The Ohio State University's Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy.

"Even those who are most ready for school will be affected if they encounter difficulties in the transition."

These findings are important because a [recent Ohio State study](#) suggests that up to 70% of kindergartners struggle with some kind of difficulty during their transition, Sun said.

The study was published in the journal [Early Childhood Research Quarterly](#).

The study involved 626 kindergarten students in 64 classrooms across 15 schools in one large district in Ohio. It is part of a larger project, called [Early Learning Ohio](#), that examines [children's learning](#), achievement and social development during the first five years of schooling, from pre-K through third grade.

About 10–14 weeks into the school year, teachers rated each child's difficulty transitioning to the classroom. Children were rated in five areas: academics, making friends, working within groups, being

organized, and following schedule and routine.

The kindergarten students also completed assessments of their math, reading and social-behavioral skills at the beginning and end of the year.

Results showed that children who scored best on the academic and social-behavioral assessments at the beginning of the year—a sign of kindergarten readiness—were less likely than others to have transition difficulties.

"That is probably not surprising, because children with lower levels of these skills may experience more challenges in the classroom," Sun said.

But the researchers also found that children who experienced fewer transition difficulties at the beginning of kindergarten demonstrated relatively more gains in math, reading and social-behavioral skills at the end of kindergarten, even when taking into account their kindergarten readiness skills and other factors that could play a role in skill development.

Relatedly, transition difficulties influenced development across the year for all children, regardless of their initial readiness skills.

Why is the transition to kindergarten so important?

Children with transition difficulties may face more disruptions in making connections with teachers and peers—the people who can support them and help promote their learning and [social development](#), Sun explained.

"Without that support, it makes it difficult for them to benefit from the classroom environment, even if they were prepared coming in," she said.

The results suggest that there needs to be more communication and connections between pre-K teachers, kindergarten teachers and parents, Sun said.

"We need to make sure that preschool and kindergarten instruction is more aligned," she said. "There's a drastic change between the two that some children have difficulty coping with."

[Research by the Crane Center](#) shows that preschoolers spend 14% of their time in instruction in language and literacy, compared to 43% of the time in kindergarten. Preschool children spend 49% of their time in [free play](#), compared to only 11% in kindergarten.

"Creating this alignment between preschool and kindergarten is difficult because of the lack of connections between the teachers," Sun said. "We need to bring those educators together."

In addition, schools should develop interventions to help children having difficulty adjusting to kindergarten.

"Interventions for [children](#) with transition difficulties will not only help them, but it could also lessen disruptions in classroom learning that hurt all students," she said.

Other co-authors, all from Ohio State's Crane Center, Department of Educational Studies or Department of Human Sciences, were Laura Justice, Hui Jiang, Kelly Purtell, Tzu-Jung Lin and Arya Ansari.

**More information:** Jing Sun et al, Big little leap: The role of transition difficulties in children's skill development during kindergarten, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ecresq.2023.12.008](#)

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